

Lewis Brogdon. *The Bible in the Ashes of Social Chaos: An Introduction to Problematic Texts*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023. 128 pages. \$20.

Throughout Christian history, interpreters have adapted biblical hermeneutics to address the meaning and relevance of scripture for varied social and cultural moments. With this short, accessible volume, Lewis Brogdon charts a path for readers of the Bible in the wake of manifold social crises in the United States. He asserts that though the majority of our society would claim that the Bible is an important book, biblical illiteracy is on the rise (Brogdon, 3–7). Given the Bible’s great complexity and its abundance of “problematic texts” (e.g., stories of horrific violence, genocide, slavery), people no longer know how to engage the Bible as an authoritative, let alone divine, collection of writings. Brogdon’s purpose for writing this book is to offer a primer for three audiences: people in the church who “are interested in thinking critically” about the Bible, undergraduate students who are enrolled in a Bible course, and people who are wrestling with their faith (10–14). Offering insights from African American biblical hermeneutics, Brogdon models for readers the importance of naming and engaging the complexity of biblical texts in order to discern how God is speaking through scripture. He writes, “In the end, wrestling with problematic texts shows thoughtful persons ... that faith and intellectual honesty can work together for those of us who hold Scripture as the word of God” (54).

The book is divided into two sections. *Part One: Getting Honest about the Bible* is concerned with surfacing primary challenges for understanding the Bible in our present context. He rightly names biblical illiteracy, the presence of problematic texts, and the church’s history of misusing scripture for pernicious ideological ends as hindrances to substantive engagement with the Bible. Brogdon’s appropriate criticism of the church’s handling of scripture is tempered with generous insight. He states, “I believe the reason some Christians suppress this history is because they do not want people to lose faith in the Bible’s ability to speak on spiritual issues” (49). Charitable insights like this appear throughout the book, denoting Brogdon’s sincere love for the church, even as he holds our hermeneutics to the fire. Toward the end of Part One, he echoes an observation from Phyllis Trible’s 1984 *Texts of Terror* when he describes problematic biblical texts as a mirror, reflecting back to us the “painful realities of a sinful world” (72). He adds, “There is wisdom in including problematic texts in Scripture. They cut to deep issues about humans and faith communities in unique and impactful ways” (73).

In *Part Two: From the Text to Our Context*, Brogdon develops the theological impulse for his hermeneutical method. All interpretation of scripture should ultimately be bound to the tasks of discerning God, listening for the Spirit, and seeing Jesus Christ (77). In pursuing the heart of God through our interpretation of scripture, we move from hermeneutics to praxis “that advocates for the vulnerable” (97). He acknowledges that there is no single, simplified, streamlined way to move from interpretation to practice: “our discernment of God’s work is subjective and messy and imperfect; it does not answer all the questions nor solve all the problems.” Yet “the perfect God—not the text—utilizes imperfect people, tools, words, cultures, and writings to reveal truth to the world” (84).

Anyone who reads this book will need to confront the insufficiency of their engagement with scripture for their current social context—an exceedingly uncomfortable task for some. However, Brogdon models for his readership the appropriate response to such a challenge: a response of confession. He shares about his own journey of learning to engage deeply with scripture, while learning to confront his own social prejudices. By pulling back the curtain for his

readership, he assumes an invitational posture as one who sojourns with his readers. In the final chapter of the book, Brogdon issues this clarion call: “It is time to move beyond the weaponization of the Bible. It is time to avoid approaches that discourage dialogue about issues of faith. It is time to craft spaces in our minds and in our churches for a theological vision that is bigger than the small theologies that have for centuries propped up colonialism, racism, militarism, and capitalism” (101). The future of the church depends upon our capacity to summon this moral clarity and ethical urgency. This book offers ministers, students, and laypeople alike an abundance of insight to meet the needs of our present moment in the ashes of a chaotic age.

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby
Assistant Professor in the Department of Bible, Missions, & Ministry
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, TX